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Motorists and rail passengers to pay more for the roads and railways. The financing of Switzerland's infrastructure is on a sound footing by international comparison, with special funds for both road and rail transport. However, current funding is insufficient to meet future expansion and maintenance costs. The Federal Council now wants motorists and rail passengers to make a greater contribution. By René Lenzin

Switzerland's transport infrastructure is worth around CHF 280 billion. It costs some CHF 6 billion a year to maintain and will require expansion work costing around CHF 97 billion up to 2030. These figures were recently produced by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Actual expenditure on this infrastructure is as follows: Switzerland invested around CHF 8 billion in roads and railways in 2008, with 55% of the outlay going on roads and 45% on railways.

Switzerland is in a very good position by international comparison when it comes to financing transport. Specially earmarked resources enable long-term and virtually recession-proof planning for this economically pivotal infrastructure. In addition to the ordinary budgets of communes, cantons and federal government, there are three pots of money exclusively available for transport:

Switzerland has created a fixed-term fund for major railway projects, such as the new base tunnels at the Gotthard and Lötschberg, the "Bahn 2000" project and the connection to the European high-speed network. It is financed by the output-related heavy goods vehicle tax and a proportion of fuel duty and

value added tax. The fund generates around CHF 1.8 billion a year.

Half the fuel duty, the fuel duty surcharge and income from motorway tolls go into what is known as the special road transport fund. This currently produces an annual income of CHF 6.5 billion.

Over the next 20 years, CHF 20 billion from this special fund will go into an infrastructure fund for the completion of the national road network and elimination of bottlenecks as well as for public and private transport in urban areas.

Costs underestimated

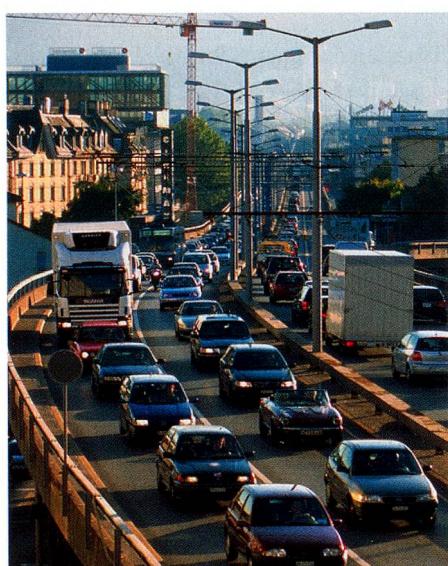
Many neighbouring countries envy Switzerland for this type of sustainable financing programme, particularly at a time of economic downturn and exorbitant national debt for some. However, Switzerland cannot afford to rest on its laurels. On the contrary, the above estimates by the Swiss National Science Foundation show that future funding requirements will not be met by current expenditure without meticulous planning involving sacrifices. On the one hand, the authorities have underestimated the operating costs of the new railway infrastructure. On the other, economic growth and the increase in traffic will create new demands that are not taken into account by the existing planning.

Federal Councillor Doris Leuthard, who moved from the Federal Department of Economic Affairs to the Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications after the departure of Moritz Leuenberger, appears to want to tackle this problem resolutely. After just over two months in her new post, she has already presented an outline proposal on transport financing to the government. In mid-January, the entire Federal Council gave her the green light to develop the proposed measures in greater depth. Leuthard's project is based on earmarked special funding as described above.

A new railway infrastructure fund

For the railways, the Federal Council is planning to remove the fixed-term restriction on the existing fund and to assign the annual resources for the railways to this pot as well. Operation, maintenance and expansion of the railways would be funded from the new railway infrastructure fund. As things stand, the railway infrastructure fund would receive around CHF 4 billion a year. However, according to the Federal Council, this will not be sufficient to cover future requirements – for the two variants of the "Bahn 2030" project alone, expansions on the scale of CHF 12 or CHF 21 billion are anticipated. Even if the Federal Council splits the project up into individual expansion stages, the project, together with the costs for operating and maintaining the existing network, will still exceed the income of the railway infrastructure fund. The Federal Council is therefore proposing additional income of around CHF 900 million a year (see box).

The road transport situation is somewhat less dramatic. However, according to the Federal Council, there is also the risk of a funding shortfall here from around 2015. It wants to prevent this by increasing the special road transport fund. Its revenue is to be increased in two stages by CHF 0.8 billion to CHF 1.15 billion a year (see box). The consultation process for the railway funding proposals is set to begin. As for the road funding concept, Federal Councillor Leuthard still has to examine this in greater detail with the Federal Department of Finance, which is responsible for motorway tolls and fuel duty.



Commuters are already causing traffic jams



Crowds at rush hour on the Swiss railways

Opposition from all sides

The Federal Council's proposals constitute an indirect counterproposal to the recently submitted popular initiative on public transport. This project launched by environmental associations and left-wing/green parties calls for half the earmarked fuel duty to be made available to public transport. The Federal Council's plan also intends the use of fuel duty for the railways but it believes the level of redistribution proposed by the initiative's organisers goes too far.

Whether its concept can win majority support will only become clear during the political debate. However, there is widespread opposition. The cantons are against additional expenditure on the railways. The SP and the Greens will not accept tariff increases for public transport because this offers environmentally misguided incentives, and many conservative politicians want to prevent public transport from being permanently financed in part by road transport duties.

ADDITIONAL INCOME

Road: As a first step, the price of the motorway toll would be increased from CHF 40 to between CHF 80 and CHF 100. This would produce additional annual revenue of CHF 300 to 450 million.

The fuel duty surcharge would later increase by 7 cents to 10 cents per litre, generating additional annual income of CHF 500 to 700 million.

Rail: The railways would have to pay CHF 300 million a year more for use of the tracks. As they would pass on this increase in train path charges to customers, the average cost of rail travel would increase by 10%.

Anyone commuting long distances would in future be allowed to deduct less in travel expenses from taxes. This would produce additional income of CHF 250 million, which would go to the railways.

The cantons would contribute CHF 300 million to the railway infrastructure fund.

The fund would receive an additional CHF 40 million a year from redeployment of the existing guarantee credit for noise protection.

Military weapons to remain at home in the cupboard

56.3% of voters and 20 cantons have rejected the weapons initiative. Members of the army will not have to store their weapons in armouries in the future. By René Lenzin

The popular initiative entitled "Protection against armed violence" suffered defeat at the ballot box. With a turnout of just under 49%, the proposal was opposed by the majority of cantons and the Swiss people. Only four French-speaking cantons as well as Basel-Stadt and Zurich supported the initiative (see map).

Overall, differences in voting behaviour were evident between urban and rural areas rather than between linguistic regions. Although the overall outcome in French-speaking Switzerland was narrow approval, the rural cantons of Fribourg and Valais rejected the initiative with a "no" vote above the national average. The urban-rural divide was best illustrated in the two cantons with the largest populations. In the canton of Zurich, 33.9% voted in favour in the Andelfingen district compared to 65.4% in the Zurich district. 40.6% of voters approved the initiative overall in the canton of Berne compared to 66.4% in Berne city.

The popular initiative called for military weapons to be stored in armouries rather than at home, as they are now. It also demanded a national weapons register as well

as evidence of the need to purchase and ability to use firearms. It aimed to have a preventive effect as the Federal Council and Parliament had already tightened up firearms legislation prior to the vote. Soldiers can no longer keep ammunition for their army pistols or assault rifles at home. They can also deposit their weapons at armouries voluntarily, but very few have done so thus far.

After the referendum, Simonetta Sommaruga, the Minister of Justice, announced further plans to tighten firearms legislation to prevent fatal accidents and suicides involving military weapons.

No referenda on 15 May

No more national referenda will be held before the federal elections on 23 October 2011. Given that there are no proposals ready to be put to the vote, the Federal Council has decided no referenda will take place on the originally scheduled date of 15 May. However, various elections and referenda will still take place on this date at cantonal and communal level.

